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The fiction writer uses language to create the illusion of reality. A work of fiction is an illusion of life in which characters attempt to transform basic reality by casting their desires and views upon it, thus creating internal conflict between elements of the real and the unreal. Characters must sort out through experiences that enable them to discover what truths finally exist. Every fiction has its own basic reality, through which the life of characters and their illusions are revealed, and from which past meaning often creeps into the setting. The task for any writer is to discover the "reality tone" of each work--the basis of truth upon which all variations on the whole language system are set. Tracking down the source of an idea and discovering the true components of a fiction are intriguing work, but they are work that is, in a sense, a sideline and after the fact, for it is not necessary to know the source of an idea in order to expand upon it. To get an idea and from it create a system of illusion that readers accept as reality is the most exciting prospect of all. (HTH)

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ILLUSION AND REALITY

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BY VIRGINIA HAMILTON

Miss Hamilton, an author of books for young people, presented this lecture at the Library of Congress on November 17, 1975, in observance of National Children's Book Week.

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Illusion and Reality

What I do for a living and what I do daily as, generally, a most pleasurable pastime are one and the same. I make up people and places. I write fiction. Occasionally, I write a work of non-fiction, which is no less important to me. But I am predominantly a fiction writer.

The best definition of fiction I've come across is a dictionary definition which states that fiction is "an assumption of a possibility as a fact irrespective of the question of its truth." Put another way, the fiction writer works within the realm of illusion. Without the benefit of visual aids or even background music, the writer uses a single system of language to create the illusion of reality.

The most frequent question asked of fiction writers is "Where do you get your ideas?" I've yet to find a satisfactory answer to that question, but usually I reply rather lamely, if not desperately, "Well, they just come into my head." It's obvious from the ensuing silence that the questioner might well be thinking "Why do they come into your head? Such ideas certainly never come into mine."

I think it can safely be said that there is no one answer and no one place where a writer gets ideas. Rather, there are many answers and many places, perhaps as many as there are writers. What I'd like to suggest is the particular direction I take in uncovering the scope of an idea as it relates to reality and illusion in fiction, and also in biography. For ideas do just come into my head and I create fictions out of them, often long before I uncover their source.

Anyone who has been asked by a child whether what he or she views on television is real or unreal is familiar with the confusing elements of reality and illusion. Before the most recent restrictions on the depiction of violence on family-hour television, my own son was mightily confused when the bad guys fell mortally wounded. "Are they actors?" he asked. "Are they acting dead? Will they get up after the show? How can they be shot and get up after the show? How do you *know* they will get up after the show?" I never convinced him that the actors did indeed get up. But unknown to me, my young son had gathered evidence for the proof, himself. For in all those dramas in which bad guys fell down dead, there had been one element of truth missing.

A few years ago, when suddenly the horrid scene flashed on the air of a prominent individual being shot and falling seemingly mortally wounded, my son happened to see it. He covered his eyes. "It's real!" he whispered and ran from the room. Later I asked him how he had known it was real, for he had come in in the midst of the scene and not at the announcement of a special bulletin. "Because," he said, "there was blood on him. There was blood on the ground." My son had noticed what I had missed when the bad guys fell on Saturday-night television. Earlier restrictions had cleaned up some of the violence. Blood was never shown.

This example is, of course, a much too vivid and tragic way for a child to learn the difference between the real and the unreal. My own children now often watch the evening news and documentary programs because I think it's important that they understand the difference between reality and illusion in life, in entertainment, and in books as well.

A work of fiction is an illusion of life in which characters attempt to transform a basic reality by casting their desires and their subjective views upon it. In essence, the attempt creates internal conflict between elements of the real and the unreal. Characters must sort out the conflict through experiences that enable them to discover what truths finally exist.

In *M. C. Higgins, the Great,* an environment of plot and characters is based upon the supplanting of reality by the wishes and dreams of one main character. M. C. Higgins desperately seeks escape for his family through a single misconception which becomes for him the only reality: his mother will become a great singer, acquiring enough money for them all to leave their ancestral home on a threatened mountain. Within the misconception, M. C. is able to sort out certain truths by means of experience. Finally, he sees there is no way for him to rid the mountain of its spoil through illusion. At the end, the scarred land, the spoil heap, and the immense mining machines remain to be dealt with by means of whatever reality is left to him.

The two books of Jahdu stories I've written fall outside the realm of the reality–illusion principle of the novels and delve, instead, into the rich vein of American black folklife, both past and present. These tales are based less on a fantasy tradition and more on African prototypal folk myths of animal heroes. The African jackal, hare, tortoise, and hyena were translated on the American continent into the fox, rabbit, terrapin, and wolf.

The shaman/hero of Africa is here transformed into the trickster/hero, who personifies the wit and cunning of individuals once condemned within a slavocracy. The amorphous Jahdu of the Jahdu tales, born of no woman but in an old oven, suggests the transcendental nature of present-day black experience in America.

Aware as I am, and was, of the limitations imposed upon purveyors of black literature in this country, perhaps I sought through the Jahdu tales to expand and elevate concerns beyond real and imagined limits of nonwhite American experience. From this, some few critics have deduced an eccentricity of character delineation and definition within my fiction.

Virginia Hamilton's characters are said to deviate from the recognized or usual. They are variously described as peculiar, odd, and queer—strange, columnar figures fixed somewhat off center of known human orbits. They are detached, as was Zeely, separated by her very height; or Mr. Pool in *The Planet of Junior Brown,* barred from his professional group by a self-imposed disengagement; or Mr. Pluto in *The House of Dies Drear,* isolated because of the locals' superstitious belief in his supernatural activity; or Junior Brown, rejected because of his ugly fat; or M. C. Higgins, literally risen above mere mortals by means of a forty-foot pole. These are some of my eccentrics. But why the need for them? Why are they created with this quality of spiritual isolation, of other-worldness, when I, their originator, feel so normal within, having no mental aberrations that obsess me?

We find a clue in my past. Back in college, I tested "normal" as part of the control group in a series of psychological experiments. Translating "normal" to mean that I was average, I came to detest the term. In vain, I searched within me for a secret hate, a trauma. But it seemed that all of my conscious and unconscious fears and "bumps in the night" were boringly within the limits of normalcy, if we are to believe the results of the tests. Even my childhood anemia and bed-wetting were blandly attributed to the zealous but normal strivings of an overly protective father ambitious for his children.

Later on, I was amused and, ultimately, relieved to discover in the writings of Gertrude Stein that while at Harvard Annex (now Radcliffe) and a student of William James, Ms. Stein was a subject of a student project in experimental psychology. Another student complained to Professor James that Gertrude Stein had no subconscious reactions; therefore she invalidated

the results of his experiment. "Ah," said Professor James, "if Miss Stein gave no response I should say that it was as normal not to give a response as to give one. . . ."

Gertrude Stein always disliked the abnormal, which she felt was so obvious. And she believed that "normal" was "so much more simply complicated and interesting," a statement which gives us an insight into her writing of objective subjectivity. For Ms. Stein is the focus and center of all of her own work. Writing only of what she was hearing, feeling, and seeing at the moment, she nevertheless always viewed herself with complete detachment.

As a student, then, fortified by my reading of Stein and her mentor William James, I came to accept my condition of being normal less as a terminal disease and more as something solid, like bedrock, upon which some individual mark might be made. Coming to the present, I wonder whether eccentric creations in fiction are not as normal for me as totally conscious but seemingly automatic writings were for someone like Gertrude Stein.

Few writers are as un-self-conscious as was Ms. Stein, with the ability to write alone, as it were, with no involvement with the past. Most writers work within and through a framework of myths, delusions, dreams and realities of the group to which they bear allegiance. This may hold true for black writers more than for other American groups, for the survival pattern of their group pervades the generations as though it were an inherent collective trait. Black people who in recent history were born into bondage as property, had to be different from other people. Even for those born free within the bonded group, slavery must have become a stigma that bled their hearts and marked their minds.

My own grandfather had to be different. Born a slave, as an infant he was sold away with his mother, never to know his father. The years he lived as part of my child life, I knew him as this old friend, chewing tobacco, barely five feet tall, who at eighty could jump from a standing-still position into the air to click his heels together three times and land still standing. Never ever could I do that.

One of grandpa's hands was forever maimed to an inch of being closed tight. He had been employed in a gunpowder mill near Xenia, Ohio. One day, the explosive mixture caught fire; the mill burned to the ground. There were great flames, and for some reason grandpa reached out for the fire. In a moment of

confusion, perhaps he thought the flame would melt away the stigma. His hand was burned hideously. It was bandaged shut and it healed that way, a closed fist from which the generation of his grandchildren, from which I, would hold tight and swing.

How eccentric an image is that fiery hand with the closed fist! How easily it becomes symbolic, even for me. How eccentric is the total history of blacks in America, imbued as it is with the spiritual isolation of the fugitive alone and running, with weird tales which are true tales handed down from one generation to the next. The characters I create are descendants of slaves and freemen. All carry with them the knowledge of former generations who were born as livestock, as property. That sort of knowledge must corner reality for them and hold it at bay. It must become in part eccentric and in part symbolic for succeeding generations. So it is natural that I try through fiction to break down the symbols and free the reality.

As an example, simple curiosity caused me some time ago to attempt to discover the depths of the term *the Street*. Trusting my instinct, I felt there was more to the inordinate use of the term in the lexicon of subculture language than mere ambience.

I had made use of the term in *The Planet of Junior Brown*, where both Junior Brown and Buddy Clark are involved in some way in the Street. Buddy is a street youth, having no home and no normal family as we know family. He lives by his wits in the Street, and he takes from the Street, as he learns from it, only as much as he needs for survival. However, Junior Brown is the opposite of a street youth. He has a home, he has family, but these do not nourish him as the Street nourishes Buddy Clark. Thus, Junior creates the illustration of the Red Man to fill his emptiness, in which he paints the Street—all of the people he sees as free and together, sharing all, even misery. It is interesting that Red Man is the name of a well-known tobacco and that my grandfather was the only one of my relatives who chewed tobacco. The Street also refers back to my grandfather, although I was not conscious of this when I wrote the book.

Many times, my mother had told me of the song her father sang to her while she swung from his closed fist, as I did in my youth. "Dad would tell about the Rag Man," she said. "Coming down the street, the Rag Man would sing his song: 'Any rags, any bones, any bottles today,' he'd sing. 'The big black rag man's coming your way. Any rags, any rags,' he'd sing, all along the street."

I loved that street cry and often sing it to my own children. It's only recently I've wondered at the phrase *the Street* as referred to by my mother in relation to the Rag Man. For there were no *streets* as such in our rural country a hundred years ago when my grandfather was a boy or eighty years ago when my mother was a small child. Was the term *the Street* a simple accident, the result of an unconscious shift to a more modern expression? I asked my mother about it. Now that she thought about it, she said, the Rag Man came down the road or the lane, but they always said he came down the street. She insisted on that. "Even grandpa said the Street?" I asked. "Yes," she said, "always."

Occasionally, I wondered about the expression, not actually aware that I had begun to search for something. I knew that in the forties Ann Petry's novel *The Street* had been published. And I made a note when Mordecai Richler's book entitled *The Street* was published in 1975 here in Washington by New Republic Book Company. I remarked to myself how many different cultures view the Street as a particular reality. So it was with Richler's Street and Petry's Street in Harlem. Was it the same with my grandpa's Street, and if so, what particular place or reality did it represent, and in what period of time?

Things do fall into my hands rather unexpectedly. I have a habit of seeking the old, old curios, and old people whose long memories I admire. I even follow old roads in the country which twist and turn, change names suddenly, and end just anywhere. One of my favorite old roads leads to a stupendous shopping mall, acres and acres of it out in the middle of nowhere. Surprisingly, the mall has turned into a goldmine for old things.

Perhaps all over, but certainly in my part of the Midwest, the great shopping malls built in the sixties and still being built have fallen on hard times. With lines of sleek stores opening onto one gigantic enclosure of fountains, potted palms and rest areas, these monstrous malls are hit hard by a depressed economy. Consumers, suffering though long periods of unemployment, have given up making the long drive out when they can save gasoline by shopping in town or not at all. Mall lights are dimmed, stores are uncomfortably chilly, and sales personnel have disappeared. Viewed from a distance, surrounded by huge, empty parking lots, my favorite mall is eerily quiet, like the giant launchpad for a dream ship that has come and gone.

I find it all very sad, for shopping malls have always seemed

to me particularly American—our adventuresome, garish ode to good times—what with their massive promenades and thirty-foot display windows. We show off; like to think big. But I can envision a day when the whole extravaganza will fall into the hands of the populace. Displaced farmers will come forth on giant tractors to plow up acres of cement. Workers will plant boutiques of corn and wheat. Hired hands will lay out endless holding pens for Black Angus under massive skylights.

Yet, suddenly, something has happened out there in nowhere that is far more interesting than any future sight of fountains irrigating fields. These days one expects to see camels drinking at marble watering holes. For every inch of the spacious promenade has been taken over by incredible bazaars. Hawkers of every stripe and character are out selling Americana to America. They drift in on Harley-Davidsons, or in minibuses and campers like gypsies, and then melt away again. While they're out there, you can buy old coins, handwoven blankets, old oak furniture, handblown bottles, rolling pins, quilts, Kewpie dolls and carnival canes, and books. Area communes produce afghans and pure honey. One dude wearing chaps and a leather vest came strolling in leading a matched team of Leopard Appaloosas, but they threw him out. On weekends, we go out to the mall to be astonished and to pick over and fondle the past.

The first item my hand fell upon one Saturday was an album of old postcards. I can't say why I paused there, since I collect little of the past beyond that which I store in memory. But as I leafed idly through the album, I came to a section labeled "Negro Postcards." These were a ghastly commentary on an uncertain black history—painted portraits of toothy "pickaninnies" slurping watermelon, or photos of ragged black children grinning and dancing. At once repelled and fascinated, I flipped over one card depicting a melon eater, to discover this message: "Dear Mildred. I am here where I was going. I was going no farther and Mildred, I hope to die here. I thought you would want to know. Alice."

Such a stunning, sad message. I stood there for half an hour reading other messages but the whole time wondering what kind of journey Alice had embarked upon. Were these cards with their stereotype portraits used solely by white wanderers? Would even white users of the cards believe that the crude portraits truly represented blacks? I thought of buying up all of the "Negro" cards to study them at my leisure. But in the end I left

them there, every one of them. At the last, one intrusion into the privacy of the dead and gone was enough. I had learned all that I needed to know.

I did find something at the bazaar that day which I had to have, and which is the point of this long exposition. A slim paper volume entitled *Homes of the Freed*, published in the twenties and written by Rossa B. Cooley. Its cover illustration is a woodcut of a crude cabin with a figure seated before it, a clouded sky and a road winding by the cabin. Below the title is the notation, "The oncoming of three generations of women from the plantation street. . . ." Here was the Street again, but used in a wholly unexpected way.

Homes of the Freed hoped to demonstrate how "the purely academic character of the early Negro schools" started by northern teachers during Reconstruction could be thoroughly eradicated by means of domestic training and service programs and supplanted by "the self-dependent households of freedom and . . . what this has meant to the women of the race." It was a terribly biased approach to the education of black women, but interesting to me personally for the story it tells of the great transition from the black Street of slave days.

Homes of the Freed gives testimony of old black people remembering what their parents and grandparents told them. An elderly man relates the history of a row of slave cabins, always calling it the Street.

Women worked from "dayclean," as the dawn was called, until tasks in the fields were done. The fields were isolated, lonely places where, apparently, women often worked separately from men and were cut off from the comparative security of the cabins, from newborn babes, and from their very young children. A whole system of day care had to be arranged for these children in the Street. Black women too old to work the fields became the Maumas or nurses, and the newborns were carried out into the fields to be suckled by their mothers and then returned to the Street.

In the Street in front of the cabins, the Maumas built a huge fire and, in one great cooking pot, cooked the meals for the children, for themselves, and for the field hands. The food for the pot was supplied by the whole of the Street. The Maumas and babies all ate from it. When the workers had completed their tasks, they returned to the Street and they too ate from the pot. They ate and talked quietly. They were tired to the bone

now, but they gained strength again from one another and the communal life of the Street.

So it is that the Street down which came the Rag Man of my grandfather's song and the Street in *The Planet of Junior Brown* may both hark back to the old time in the plantation Street. The Street may well be that which the slaves gave up in order to be free. To flee from the only security they had ever known must have terrified many, but break away they did, from an old order, to discover a new reality. Still, the Street exists, not only in racial memory but in the daily lives of those who escape from mean rooms to the camaraderie, sometimes even the danger, of Petry's ghetto Street, or the stupefying drudgery of Richler's Street; in the lives of Street people, the voice of Street poets, the drama of Street theater and the prose of Street literature; also, in the lazy times on the street corners of boring small towns. The meaning of the Street in all ways and at all times is the need for sharing life with others and the search for community.

Knowing that the Street is so connected to past life in a special way which is personal to me makes the language of it richer and makes the past always present for me.

Every fiction has its own basic reality, as does the Street, through which the life of characters and their illusions are revealed, and from which past meaning often creeps into the setting. The task for any writer is to discover the "reality tone" of each work—the basis of truth upon which all variations on the whole language system are set. For reality may be the greatest of all illusions. We each know our own reality through which we seek a common ground of communication with others. The fiction writer seeks the common ground by relinquishing her own reality for the creation of a new one. No number of past successes helps this writer in the creative process of a new writing. For the very process must be created for each new reality. The way to do this is never mastered and never really learned.

It would be interesting to create a fiction in which reality and illusion are completely personified. The thought of attempting such a fiction came to me from observing my own children and their contemporaries. All seemed to be trying to find out who they really were through testing and by changing roles. I have watched them for days playing at being one another, using one another's language, walks, and hairstyles. When one Elodie D. Dangerfield from Little Rock, Arkansas, entered the seventh

grade at the beginning of this year, a number of her twelve-year-old classmates began affecting syrupy southern accents. For a time, they discarded their blue jeans and talk of sisterhood for pink dresses and evening prayer meetings. I have nothing against Elodie D. Dangerfield—not her real name, of course. In fact, I find her fascinating as I attempt to discover just who it is *she* is playing at being, or whether she is really being herself.

My observation of these young girls started me thinking. To write about a family unit in which some members are in the process of learning who they are and in which others are living a fiction they admire seemed to be the perfect sort of risk for me. Which of them would live a true portrayal and which would live an illusion? On what basis of truth can be measured the reality and the illusion personified? Moreover, it occurred to me that we all carry with us the somewhat tattered baggage of our pasts, so why not personify the past in the present as well? How does one accomplish this without reducing characters to symbols or creedal types? Add to this questions of racial identity and it becomes clear how diverse an environment of illusion and reality might be created.

The whole idea might sound rather complicated for children. Actually, it's the approach to the process of creation that gets complicated, not the idea nor the manner in which it's to be written. Moreover, we've all observed children struggling daily with an incredible array of identity forms. One nine-year-old youth of my acquaintance who is white was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up and replied, "I want to be black." His father, telling me this, was pleased by his son's answer. I was not so pleased and I told the father so, for I believe it is poor mental health for a white youth to want to grow up to be black, as it would be for a black youth to want to grow up to be white.

Said the father, "David admires black athletes. He also sees black people living around him just the way he lives. He sees no difference."

"If he sees no difference," I said, "why wouldn't he want to grow up to be white, to admire white athletes as well? And suppose he weren't living in this middle-class community where most of what he sees includes only one class of black people. Suppose he were to see the hungry and out-of-work. What then?"

"But the truth is," said the father, "David's living here where

black people are living in the same way he lives."

"You must never let him believe it is the whole truth," I said, finally.

We ended our discussion there, with the question of truth unanswered. But David nags my mind. My instinct tells me that he must be made to understand that being white is quite all right, as is being black. Perhaps he should be told that he can wish to be black if he so desires, but that the wish will not be fulfilled. Even as I say these words, they seem to melt in illusion. For we all are at least aware of the fact that there are whites among us who live as blacks, and blacks among us who live as whites. There are biracials and multiracials among us, such as my own children, who might more realistically be termed Other Kinds, or Composites, or Betweens. Can you hear children of the future saying, "I'm a 'posite. She's an 'okind. The others are 'tweens." I don't doubt anything.

Transracial peoples are nothing new in this country. The Shawnee Nation Remnant Band of the Tecumseh Confederacy has set up a nation house in my hometown, and although they appear to be white and do not seek recognition from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, they nevertheless live as Shawnee Native Americans. The Wesorts—a people who are probably Native American, but this is uncertain—live in large groups in the swamplands of southern Maryland. In the Piedmont and Blue Ridge areas of Virginia there are groups known as the "Amherst County issues," brown people who may or may not be Native American and who for years have intermarried. Many of us have long been familiar with those mysterious people, the Jackson Whites, living in New York and New Jersey, who number more than five hundred and whose origins are unknown.

We have yet to deal successfully with American transraciality in real terms, as we have failed to redefine race in light of the modern, twenty-first century progress of human kind. Certainly, here is an arena for serious study by anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and of course, writers of fiction.

Delineating such areas of a writer's thoughts as these may give an inkling of the difficulty in answering the question "Where do you get your ideas?" For ideas come from without as well as from deep sources within. They may just as easily come from my son's original knock-knock jokes as from quiet moments of contemplation in my study. They come from memory, from sight and sound. They come from living.

I've only made mention of a type of writing besides fiction and folktales which has given me a good deal of satisfaction. Although I've written just two biographies for young people, one concerning the life of W. E. B. Du Bois and the other the life of Paul Robeson, they are no less involved with the subject of reality and illusion.

I had hoped, by writing the personal history of a real individual through a disciplined presentation of facts, to create the illusion of total reality; to give readers the feeling that they walked along with the subject in his life; and through the creative use of source material, to allow the subject to speak as closely as possible in his own voice.

In this respect, of the two biographies, the Robeson biography is the most successful. The research and study of the Robeson material took a number of years. When that phase of the work was completed, I discovered it was possible during the day to evoke the Robeson spirit in my mind and to live with it as though the man were a guest in my house. I began to know Paul Robeson quite well, and slowly two aspects of him emerged to trouble me and to pose definite problems in the actual writing of the book.

The first problem, and the one easiest to deal with, was the problem of Robeson emerging not as a man but as a symbol. The same difficulty occurred in the writing of *M. C. Higgins, the Great.* In that fiction, I had to come to terms not only with the symbolic nature of mountains and rivers but with all the preconceived notions about blacks being in a state of nature or nearly [illegible] my Robeson research, it was almost impossible to find a single newspaper account that did not depict the man as somehow supernatural and larger than life. Take this one by a sportswriter when Robeson was barely eighteen and playing football for Rutgers: "He rode on the wings of the frigid breezes; a grim, silent and compelling figure. . . . It was Robeson, a veritable Othello of battle." Or this one: "A dark cloud . . . Robeson, the giant Negro."

Hardly ever was Robeson described as a man. Rather, he was "this giant," "that great, noble prince," or "the original stuff of the earth." Individuals who knew him and whom I interviewed often seemed at a loss for words or struck dumb with awe, and when they *could* put their experiences into words, the superlatives would roll forth in godlike descriptions.

Eventually, I learned to use these overwrought passages to an

advantage. But it became necessary for me to write in a very tight, simple style; to write close up to the individual in the hope that a concise and straightforward revelation of his life would finally produce a composite of the man.

The second problem was more difficult and became clear to me only after I had written a first draft of the book. Then Robeson still seemed elusive. I could not get a handle on him. He stood alone, but he did not stand out in a way I knew he must. Something about him remained out of focus and out of time. It took months for me to realize that no simple, factual presentation of Paul Robeson's life was likely ever to reveal the man in his true stature. For the basic difficulty of writing about blacks in America was intensely a problem here: the origin of black American history is fundamentally different from that of traditional American history. I have said that that history is eccentric—because it departs considerably from the usual or traditional. Because of slavery, because of continuing discrimination, segregation and exploitation throughout the history, it was and is necessary for blacks to make extreme changes in their view of themselves in American life, in their evaluation of themselves, and in their institutions.

In order to understand Paul Robeson or Dr. Du Bois, it is necessary that we understand that what the majority viewed as radical in their time was quite a normal point of view for these men whose lives were profoundly restricted by a whole system of established mores. Thus, it was not possible to write about Paul Robeson without a thorough understanding of the political and social times in which he lived. Furthermore, it became necessary to go beyond the usual thorough and traditional histories having to do with political America, Europe, and the rest of the world, such as those written by Commager and Leuchtenburg, and to search for and find those revisionist historians, like Gabriel Kolko, whose historical truths emerge as radically different from what we have taken for granted as the truth.

In revisionist historiography, the alliance of Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union at the time of World War II becomes not a matter of high ideals, deliberation, and choice but one of ruthless necessity to defeat an enemy. The European aid program instituted by the United States after the war becomes less a program of recovery for Europe from pain and suffering and more the deliberate attempt to take from Britain control of foreign markets and Middle East oil and to advance

American investments and economic and military power by means of the extension of a capitalistic system throughout the world.

Paul Robeson's drift toward radicalism and the appeal radicalism had for him become understandable from the viewpoint of a colonized people. Robeson saw himself as a citizen of the world and identified himself, as did Du Bois, with the world's workers and colonized peoples, whom he deemed criminally exploited under capitalism.

Whether the view is wholly correct or partly inaccurate, it is not possible to write about either man without recognizing that they were in a position to make contact with the world, to travel it and study it, in a way few Americans other than statesmen ever had.

Writing these two biographies from a more radical perspective was quite a challenge, and the perspective is as justified as any other, if not more so, with regard to blacks. Curiously, my studies in radical history and research into black life and history have tended to radicalize me not so much in terms of world political views as in fictional terms. I would be a rather useless individual in any revolutionary situation. I hate violence and tend to view it as a human aberration—certainly not a very radical point of view. I also tend to view capitalism as an aberration which provokes extremism, which I suppose *is* radical. In any case, we must remember that radicalism is as American as apple pie. The men who wrote the Declaration of Independence were radicals who overthrew a great colonial power. American abolitionists were radicals who were not above trickery, rabble-rousing, rioting, and murder in aid of fugitive slaves.

For myself, I deliberately attempt a kind of literary radicalism in the hope of removing traditional prose restrictions and creating new ways to approach literary forms from a perspective other than that of the majority. It is a way of continuing to legitimize nonwhite literature, bringing it into full view to provoke curiosity and discussion. Many in this country are attempting to bring not only good literature but representative literature to the country's children. I don't believe that anywhere else in the world has such an attempt been made. Here it is not always successful; it meets with varying degrees and kinds of resistance. Still, few of us would deny the right of nonwhites to a literature reflecting their concerns. I am not talking about a literature that merely satisfies a need, though that's important; I'm speaking

about a literature whose themes and philosophy may begin now and in the future continue to be entirely different from what is traditional. Indeed, it would be radical.

Tracking down the source of an idea and discovering the true components of a fiction are intriguing work. But they are work that is, in a sense, a sideline and after the fact. It is not necessary to know the source of an idea in order to expand upon it. For to get an idea and from it create a system of illusion we accept as reality is the most exciting prospect of all. Through the use of words alone, the writer creates sight and sound and emotional response. By reading words alone, the reader sees, hears, and feels. Both are demonstrating an act of mentality, the connection of minds through which belief is suspended in the interest of illusion. One would be at a loss without the other. I for one would find it impossible to write indefinitely with only myself to read what I had written.

That is why, when eager young writers seek me out for help when they know their work isn't ready and I know it isn't, I understand so completely their impatience. It is not just the need to see their work and their names in print, although that is part of it always. It is the overwhelming desire to make that connection of mind with mind, to have demonstrated the act of mentality and to have communicated. For the writer, there is nothing quite like having someone say that he or she understands, that you have reached them and affected them with what you have written. It is the feeling early humans must have experienced when the firelight first overcame the darkness of the cave. It is the communal cooking pot, the Street, all over again. It is our need to know we are not alone.

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